Methodology in Bahá'í studies[1]

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Abstract

For historical reasons, atheistic, materialistic methodologies are prominent in the academic world, which may make it a place largely unfavourable to any faith-based approach to scholarship. In this paper I identify two ways that Bahá'í scholarship can develop: interior (i.e. scholarship that develops within the Bahá'í community and is based on faith) and exterior (i.e. academic scholarship based on the rationalistic, largely materialistic methodology of academia). I suggest that although the first is not without benefit, we also need, for a number of reasons, to develop the second. I identify several approaches that might be taken by Bahá'í scholars in interacting with the academic world. That of full engagement with the methodology of the academic world; that of finding academic methodologies that are more favourable to a faith perspective; that of trying to influence the academic world from outside. Lastly I attempt to identify some features of the Bahá'í teachings that could form the basis in the long run of a Bahá'í methodology: these include such qualities as detachment, justice, being positive and constructive, achieving the balance between reason and faith, consultative processes, and the correct attitude towards Bahá'í institutions and towards the Covenant.

Those doing Bahá'í studies at present interact often with the academic fields of religious studies and Islamic and middle eastern studies. Prominent in these academic worlds is a methodology that is based upon a philosophical materialism. There are, of course, strong historical reasons for this. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Enlightenment and the progress of science caused intellectuals in Europe to move away from a God-centred view of the universe towards thinking of it as a giant machine running according to immutable laws. The church naturally resisted this trend but as the new way of looking at the universe began to be more and more successful at unravelling its secrets, the church became increasingly sidelined. By the end of the 19th century, many eminent thinkers and scientists were completely atheistic in their perception of the world. The new universities that were springing up rapidly throughout the western world became bastions of this atheistic and materialistic vision of the world.

A key reason for the triumph of the materialistic viewpoint has been the success of science and the technological advances that have occurred in the wake of scientific progress. This seemed to offer self-evident justification of the correctness of the

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[1] This paper was presented at the conference "Foundational Issues in Bahá'í Studies", held at Merton College, Oxford, in April 2000. It has also benefited from the valuable discussion of it on the Bridges e-mail list. Among those contributing to the discussion were: Dr Susan Brill, Dr Will van den Hoonaard, Dr Susan Maneck, Theo Cope, Safa Sadeghpour, Ismael Velasco, Daniel Grolin, William Michael and Gary Fuhrman.

materialistic assumptions that were held to underpin science. In philosophy, these materialistic assumptions led to the movement called positivism. According to this viewpoint, only propositions that can be empirically verified are meaningful. Although positivism itself is no longer fashionable in philosophy, it has continued to influence academic methodology. Under one variation or another, a commonly held viewpoint in positivist intellectual life was not only atheistic but rejected all metaphysical concepts as either outside its realm of consideration or meaningless.

During the 20th century, this materialistic, positivist trend was consolidated in western universities—through the physical sciences to the social sciences and humanities. A few have questioned whether the scientific, materialistic approach is valid when one moves from things to people, from the physical sciences to the social sciences and humanities. Indeed some have criticised such applications of science and called them scientism. Nevertheless, the majority of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have developed methodologies that are based on positivism and philosophical materialism. Interestingly, at the same time as this positivist methodology was increasingly dominating the social sciences and humanities, its foundations were being overturned in the physical sciences. Developments in relativity theory, quantum theory and systems theory overturned the mechanistic conceptions of traditional science. The implications of this new science are now beginning to penetrate into the humanities and into the social sciences and so there are increasing possibilities for academic scholars to work outside the strict confines of a positivist methodology, although the latter still holds the centre-ground.

The reason for my prolonged introduction on the intellectual history of the west is to lay down the background to the intellectual climate in universities today; to describe the reason for the opposition that exists in the academic world towards any spiritual orientation or values-based approach to research and discourse. Inevitably then there must be something of a methodological clash between this worldview that has sway over the universities and the Bahá'í viewpoint; between a worldview that sees this whole world as an arena in which blind and impersonal laws are operating in a mechanistic and deterministic way (and in which human beings are an accidental and marginal phenomenon conditioned and determined by their environment) and a viewpoint that sees the world as a place where "every atom in existence and the essence of all created things" has been created by a Divinity for the guidance and training of human beings, so that they can rise above their lower natures.

Academics will no doubt feel that my depiction of their methodology is a caricature and out-of-date and that there are many academic methodologies available that are not mechanistic and deterministic. I would not disagree with this. With an established religion such as Islam, for example, there are many examples of scholars who are pursuing a more interior type of scholarship. The tendency with a new religion, such as the Bahá'í Faith, however, is to examine it from the more traditional deterministic viewpoint. Ultimately, the Bahá'í claim is that something supra-natural occurs in the world with the coming of each of the Manifestations of God. Therefore, to try to account for it entirely through an examination of the culture, education and the influences upon the Manifestation of God, to try to explain it entirely in terms of sociology or psychology, or to try to limit the meanings of the scriptures produced by these

Manifestations of God to their immediate context is to misread the phenomenon. But these supra-natural considerations in relation to the Bahá'í Faith are areas into which most academic scholars will not feel able to venture, precisely because they go outside the mechanistic and deterministic universe that the academic methodology imposes upon a new religious movement such as the Bahá'í Faith. Therefore their descriptions and conclusions will ultimately remain unsatisfactory to the believer.

The Bahá'í Faith with its emphasis on values, purpose and the centrality of the spiritual world is in many ways the exact antithesis of the value-free, purposeless, materialistic viewpoint on the world that the positivist approach espouses. Thus we appear to have an impasse, an opposition between two value systems. The Universal House of Justice has on several occasions called upon Bahá'í scholars not to be distracted by attempts to dichotomise science and religion (and mind and heart), but rather to see the Bahá'í teachings "as an organic, logically coherent whole."[2] This statement is important since it signals that Bahá'ís, and Bahá'í scholars, are not opposed to the academic methodology in itself. Rather they must seek to integrate it into their worldview and methodology. Bahá'í scholars must try to integrate a rational, empirical and testable methodology (which must remain the bedrock of good scholarship) with an acknowledgement that the world also has a spiritual dimension.[3]

The Bahá'í response to this situation can be twofold. The first I will term an interior or internal scholarship, by which is meant the pursuit of scholarship on the Bahá'í Faith within the Bahá'í community. Because this type of scholarship is within the community, it can adhere to a faith-based, revelation-centred methodology. Most of the participants will be Bahá'ís but occasionally external scholars may be invited in if they subscribe to this methodology. This is a pathway that other religious communities have chosen to tread. They have built theological colleges, madrasas, yeshivas and monasteries, within the confines of which a similar faith-based internal scholarship can be pursued.

This internal scholarship is certainly one response and it is useful in that it allows Bahá'í scholars the freedom to explore the full range of the possibilities of the Bahá'í Faith. But, I would contend, it is not enough—and this for several reasons:

- *Participation in the world's image of the Bahá'í Faith and the Bahá'í community.* At this early stage in the development of the Bahá'í Faith, when it is obscure and its teachings and principles so little known, Bahá'ís need to participate in the creation of the world's image of them. How is this image created? One of the first places that the writers of newspaper articles and the makers of television programmes go to when they need accurate, impartial information about an obscure religious movement is either to encyclopaedia articles written by academics or to academics

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2 Letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual dated 8 February 1998, and published in the compilation *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith.*

3 This divergence of viewpoints reflects somewhat the differences between the reductive/empiricist paradigm of scholarship (also called analytical/ determinist/positivist/etic) and the synthetic/relativistic paradigm (also called holistic or emic). This has been discussed at greater length in M. Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000) 77-83.

themselves. These are the people who are, to a large extent, responsible for providing information about the Bahá'í Faith to the world. If Bahá'ís want to be involved in the image of the Faith that is being created, then they need to interact with the academic world. And the best way of interacting positively with the academic world is to publish material that gains the respect of that world, material that accords with its standards. Bahá'ís can no more expect to enter the academic world with a different methodology than they can expect to join in a professional football match and then ask to play under an alternative set of rules.

- *Obligation to participate in the world*. Bahá'u'lláh has put an obligation on Bahá'ís not to separate themselves off from the world but to participate in it. In particular, Bahá'í have an obligation to promote Bahá'í principles and ideas in the hope that the speedy diffusion of these will assist in their wider adoption and the consequent alleviation of humanity's suffering. By participating in the academic world, Bahá'í scholars are assisting in this process. Academic works are often the seed-bed of concepts that filter into the wider world. Thus Bahá'í concepts can be diffused by participating in the academic environment.

- *Greater understanding of the Bahá'í Faith itself*. The Bahá'í Faith is a result of an interaction between a divine impulse and the human world. To understand it Bahá'ís must, of course, study the divine input, which is primarily the text of the scripture. But they must also study and understand the other side—the human response. In what way have human factors affected the Bahá'í Faith? What lessons should the Bahá'ís of today learn from what has happened in the past? In what way can the Bahá'í teachings be presented so as to bring them to the attention of the world? What aspects of the Bahá'í Faith are most appealing to different sorts of people? Such questions are best studied through the methodologies developed by such disciplines as history, psychology, and sociology. Beyond these considerations, there is also the fact that thus far, the Bahá'í Faith has only really been experienced and examined from a middle eastern Islamic or a western Christian perspective. The examination of the Bahá'í Faith from other perspectives has scarcely yet begun. It is only through engagement and understanding other cultures and religious traditions that progress can really be made in seeing what the Bahá'í Faith looks like from a Chinese or a Hindu or a Theravada Buddhist viewpoint. Academic scholarship could be very helpful in this process, although such developments within the Bahá'í Faith could also occur outside of the academic setting. Similarly important would be the development of a view of the Bahá'í Faith from the perspective of women's studies, environmental studies or international relations.

- *Infrastructure*. Another reason to reject an exclusively internal development of Bahá'í scholarship is the fact that the Bahá'í Faith at this stage of its development cannot afford the capital and running costs of institutions that would form the basis of such scholarship. Indeed, since the Bahá'í Faith does not have a professional clergy, there is little need in the Bahá'í community for institutions similar to the theological colleges and madrasas of Christianity and Islam. There is no career path

for graduates of such institutions.

Methodological approaches

I would suggest then that Bahá'í scholars must, to some extent at least, engage in an external scholarship - an interaction with the academic world. One can identify several approaches that might be taken by Bahá'í scholars in interacting with the academic world.

- For Bahá'í scholars to suspend the Bahá'í viewpoint and immerse themselves fully in the values and ethos of the academic world; to try thereby to gain the respect of that world in the hope that once in a position of influence, they can guide the academic world towards an interest in a limited number of Bahá'í concepts.

- To find areas in the academic world in which Bahá'í scholars can participate without compromising Bahá'í principles. There are methodologies that are more favourable to a faith-based approach. In the realm of the study of religion, for example, phenomenology is such a methodology. It considers that the reduction of religious phenomena to social, psychological or other explanations is a false oversimplification. The best way of understanding such a complex phenomenon as religion is to try to get inside the religious experience. One key aspect of the method is *einfühlung*, obtaining an empathic understanding of the religious position of others. An important writer within the phenomenological school, the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith, wrote of attempting to produce material on religion that stands a dual test: that of acceptance by the academic community and also acceptance by the religious community about which the piece is written.

  Some Bahá'ís have also suggested that writing within the perennial philosophy or neoplatonic schools would also be comfortable for Bahá'í scholars. Similarly, in sociology, there are areas such as grounded theory and symbolic interactionism which stand in contrast to the hypothetico-deductive methods that have held sway in the field. On the whole, however, these methodologies that tend to be more congenial towards a faith-based approach are themselves somewhat marginalised by the academic community.

- To stand outside and seek to influence from the outside. To acknowledge that it is not possible to enter fully into the academic world because of its values and premises and therefore to remain outside it, trying to engage with it and influence it in whatever way possible. This, of course, merges with the internal scholarship described above. It is likely to be only very minimally successful at influencing academic scholarship about the Bahá'í Faith, because the academic world will be unlikely to engage to any great degree with those whose work it perceives to be flawed by incorrect methodology and unprovable metaphysical assumptions.

And so I think Bahá'í scholars have little choice but to engage with the academic world

on its own terms, adopting its methodologies (although they can seek to bend these to what we might consider a truer reflection of reality). Personally, I favour the approach of Cantwell Smith that I have described above—that of writing material that satisfies both the academic community and the believing community.

Towards a Bahá'í methodology

Although I have said that it would not be advisable for Bahá'ís to isolate themselves and to try to create a separate world within which a Bahá'í methodology would obtain, there is no reason why Bahá'ís should not be developing the outlines of such a methodology against a day when it can be more fully applied. Many of the points of such a methodology can indeed be applied even today. The following is not a methodology *per se*, but rather an attempt to extract from the Bahá'í scriptures those concepts and ideas that could form the basis of a Bahá'í methodology.

Some may say that the passage of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* that is commonly referred to as the "Tablet of the True Seeker"[4] only concerns the seeking out of religious faith, but the introductory words, in fact, speak of seeking out "the knowledge of the Ancient of Days." Since "the signs of thy Lord's mercy" can be found "in every created thing, and see the spreading rays of His Names and Attributes throughout all the realm of being,"[5] it follows that seeking out "the knowledge of the Ancient of Days" can also involve all forms of seeking or research—provided the research is done with this aim of seeking out "the knowledge of the Ancient of Days."

In the passage regarding the true seeker, many statements can be found that can be related to the methodology of research. The following are the first six exhortations that Bahá'u'lláh makes in this passage:

> He must, before all else, cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy.

Interpretation: "acquired knowledge" is a difficult phrase, but in this context I think it could be interpreted as ridding oneself of preconceptions. Each human being has certain preconceptions that have arisen as a result of our education and experiences in this world. These preconceptions mean that human beings see everything that presents itself to them from a particular viewpoint. Often the greatest and most innovative researchers, those who create new paradigms, are those who are able to step outside their preconceptions and view an old problem from a new perspective.

> He must purge his breast, which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement, and sanctify his soul from all that pertaineth to water and clay, from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments.

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4 Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989) 193-5.

5 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 41.

Interpretation: This sentence would apply to the need to rid oneself of all base motives in one's research work. Very often, work is carried out for reasons other than the pure desire to obtain the truth. Career advancement, jealousy, fear of a rival, racial, religious or gender prejudices all play a part in the interactions of academic life and the production of research work. Bahá'u'lláh states that all such "defilements" ultimately cause human beings to veer away from the truth.

> He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth.

Interpretation: In the course of their scholarly research, scholars often become very committed to certain theories or approaches to a problem. Indeed, they acquire an emotional attachment to these. Similarly they can become emotionally opposed to other theories perhaps because these are associated with certain individuals whom they do not like. In either eventuality, such emotions may blind them to the best approach to take to a problem.

> That seeker must at all times put his trust in God, must renounce the peoples of the earth, detach himself from the world of dust, and cleave unto Him Who is the Lord of Lords.

Interpretation: Very often, researchers are afraid to put forward a new idea that conflicts with the received wisdom of the academic community or go against the prevailing fashionable theory. So the researcher must be willing to stand up for what he or she believes to be the truth, unless and until it is demonstrated to be otherwise.

> He must never seek to exalt himself above any one, must wash away from the tablet of his heart every trace of pride and vainglory, must cling unto patience and resignation, observe silence, and refrain from idle talk.

Interpretation: Research work should not be motivated by a desire for self-advancement and fame, nor should one produce papers and publish material merely for the sake of having one's name before one's fellow scholars. One should only publish material when one has something new and worthwhile to say

> That seeker should also regard backbiting as grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quencheth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.

Interpretation: Criticism of another's work should be positive and constructive and not negative and destructive.

All of the above exhortations from this passage in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* apply to one engaged on research to some extent. In addition to these passages, several other themes

that appear in the Bahá'í writings may help in the development of a distinctive methodology, including justice, reason, ethics, consultation, and the Covenant.

To see things fairly is an attribute that is of great value to researchers in assessing the results of their findings. Bahá'u'lláh states that if human beings can achieve this quality, it would enable them to know of their own knowledge and not through the knowledge of their neighbour.[6] In the course of constructing a Bahá'í methodology, the high station that 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave to human reason and to the fruit of that reason, scientific thought, is also important.

> God has endowed man with reason that he may perceive what is true. If we insist that such and such a subject is not to be reasoned out and tested according to the established logical modes of the intellect, what is the use of the reason which God has given man?[7]

Reason, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, is the "discoverer of the realities of things" and what is research but the attempt to uncover "the realities of things"? He also states "that which conflicts with its conclusions is the product of human fancy and imagination."[8] Thus any Bahá'í methodology must be firmly grounded in the use of reason. The conclusions reached must be demonstrably reasonable and not contain any flaws of logic.

But, while praising the human rational faculty and encouraging its use, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also warned against excessive reliance upon it as a criterion for truth. He points out that if the reason by itself were a sufficient instrument to arrive at the truth, then we would find the philosophers all agreed upon the fruits of their reasoning processes. Whereas in fact we find no such agreement. Indeed we find that two philosophers starting from exactly the same information derive very different conclusions, and each asserts that he or she has used only rational processes in arriving at this conclusion. Thus reason by itself is not a sufficient guide on which to base research. 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of the bird of humanity having two wings—science and religion—and that humanity cannot fly upwards without a balance between the two. In relation to a research methodology, this could be understood to mean that Bahá'í scholars must balance the knowledge that come to them empirically with what information they have through revelation. Given that both of these sources are usually subject to human interpretation that is fallible, neither necessarily outweighs the other.

This principle can also mean that research must be guided by both materialistic values (meticulous examination of the sources, the strength of the evidence, the balance of probabilities, etc.) and also by spiritual values (probity, fairness, etc.). Academic scholars have always tended to regard such issues as probity and fairness as belonging to the realm of ethics and therefore not strictly part of the academic methodology. A

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6 Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990) Arabic number 2.

7 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 63-64.

8 *Ibid*., 316.

Bahá'í scholar will probably disagree.[9] In Bahá'í terms, science (hypothetico-deductive methods and the academic methodology) without religion (the application of values and ethics) will result in distortion and false conclusions. It must be also remembered that the opposite, religion (*a priori* beliefs and literalistic, fundamentalist understandings) without the science (reason) to balance it, will lead to dogmatism, superstition and sterility in the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community. A Bahá'í methodology would be human-centred rather than results-oriented. This means that ethical considerations would predominate over the desire to get results. Considerations of people's feelings, confidentiality, the ethics of the ways used to gather data, and the value of the individual human being may all mean that certain methods or certain data would not be used even though they may yield useful information.

The concept of consultation is a powerful one in the Bahá'í teachings. The methodology of consultation is one that could be applied to scholarly research and which could form the basis of a radical new Bahá'í research methodology that would be the exact antithesis of many of the features of the prevailing academic methodology. Instead of the promotion of one's own opinion, one's view becomes lost as one submits it to the group; the group then works on the view expressed and a complete revision of that view emerges as the final result, such that it is no longer possible to attach the name of any individual to the idea.

Lastly a Bahá'í methodology cannot ignore the centrality of the Covenant in the Bahá'í Faith. There are two aspects to this: the first theoretical and the second practical. The first means that for a Bahá'í, the situation with regard to authority is often the reverse of what it is for academic scholars. For an academic history scholar, the older a historical source, the more likely it is to be reliable. Thus an older source will usually be considered better than a more recent source. In the Bahá'í Faith, because of the Covenant, it does not work that way. The interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá may be more recent than the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, but if they interpret the writings of Bahá'u'lláh one way, then no amount of protestation by scholars that they can prove that Bahá'u'lláh intended something else is going convince a Bahá'í audience. For Bahá'ís, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation trumps all other interpretations of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. The practical aspect of the Covenant involves, of course, obedience to the present centre of the Covenant, the Universal House of Justice, and those institutions of the Bahá'í Faith established under the authority of the Universal House of Justice.

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[9] The following analogy may help to explain why: suppose one went to a football match and watched the game for the full period of time and thoroughly enjoyed it. All the rules of the game had been fully enforced. The referee had been fair to both sides. Everything seemed to indicate that one had watched a good game of football. What would then be one's thoughts if one read the next day in the newspaper that in fact the match had been fixed and one team had taken a bribe from the other team and had thrown the match. The fact is that the match was played out in front of one's eye and, according to the rules of the game, everything was done correctly. But this single piece of information (that the match was fixed) suddenly sheds a whole new light on what one had watched. Similarly, a scholar can produce a paper that follows academic methodology so well that it cannot be faulted. And yet if there is an ethical flaw underlying the paper—the paper is being written to assist some ulterior motive, for example, then surely this is relevant to one's assessment of the paper?